Capitol Punishment

They're Really Good Boys, At Heart

By Art Buchwald

The revelation that the FBI has been committing all sorts of crimes, including break-ins, forgery, illegal bugging, violating civil liberties and worse, raises an important question. Should the people responsible for breaking the law of the land be tried and sent to jail?

Roderick Wilcomb, of the "Society to Rehabilitate Wayward G-Men," says it would be wrong to send FBI agents to prison for crimes committed in the name of national security.

"Society will not be served by putting these people away," he said. "Many of them came from broken homes and never had the breaks you or I had. If I thought punishment was the answer, I would be for it. But there has to be a better way to solve the FBI crime problem than locking the agents up."

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

"We have to teach them a trade so they can become responsible citizens again and learn that there is no future in crime."

"What kind of a trade?"

"We could teach them how to catch criminals—car thieves, kidnapers, hijackers and members of the mob. We could train them in law enforcement methods without breaking the law themselves. Once they learned the trade, they could go out and get jobs and not have to resort to housebreaking, spying and dirty tricks."

"That sounds like the bleeding-heart approach to crime," I accused Wilcomb. "Do you realize that many of these men did not commit one crime, but went back and back again?"

Wilcomb replied, "That's because society never gave them a chance. A lot of them started hanging around with guys like J. Edgar Hoover when they were young, and they never had an opportunity to learn right from wrong. Most of them played 'Follow the Leader.' If Hoover said, 'Let's break into a house,' they all followed him. If he said, 'Let's stick a bug in Martin Luther King's hotel room,' nobody questioned it. If he said, 'How about forging a letter?' Everyone immediately sat down and started writing letters on unmarked paper. Maybe they were mischievous, but as Efrem Zimbalist once said, 'There is no such thing as a bad G-man.' "

"Wilcomb," I said, "I'm for rehabilitation providing the person has learned his lesson. But how can we be sure these black-bag operators and break-in artists won't go back to their old tricks once you put them on the street again?"

"They won't if we teach them skills such as fingerprinting, filing and typing up reports. You don't just give up on a person because he once violated the law. I know many of these people, and they say they would like to make good if society would only give them a chance. But people in this country don't seem to want to rehabilitate FBI agents who went wrong; they want to punish them. Do you know what it would cost the taxpayer if we sent every FBI agent who committed a crime to prison? Millions of dollars. Why can't we use the same money to train them to be honest law enforcement officers."

"I don't know," I said. "You're taking an awful chance."

Wilcomb admitted, "Sure, we'll have one or two backsliders, who would rather commit crime than do an honest day's work. I'm not saying the program will be 100 per cent successful. But if we can save even 60 per cent of these people, all of us will profit from it."

"I still think we should be tougher on people who commit crimes. But I'll say this for you, Wilcomb, your approach is a novel one, and while I can't support you financially I hope it works."

"Don't worry about the finances," he told me. "I'm hoping to get a grant from the Ford Foundation for a pilot program. We're going to have a halfway house where the courts will send us FBI agents who committed crimes. If we can succeed with rehabilitating this group, we may be able to persuade the Justice Department to drop charges against all the other G-men who went wrong."

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